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'Longest-serving' political prisoner freed

April 4, 2002 Posted: 4:03 AM EST (0903 GMT)



Chinese troops invaded Tibet in 1950

term extended twice -- in 1988 by five years and in 1991 by eight years -- for staging demonstrations.

Human rights groups have called the Tibetan activist China's longest-serving political prisoner "that we know of."

Chinese troops invaded Tibet in 1950, a year after the communist takeover of power, quickly defeating an 8,000-strong Tibetan force.

Shortly afterwards the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader fled to India, and set up the Tibetan Government in Exile in the northern town of Daramsala.

Since the Chinese takeover rights groups say Beijing has been engaged in heavy repression of Tibetan activists or any activity that could be seen as opposing Chinese rule.

Western calls

Foreign Ministry officials were not available for comment, but Jigme Sangpo is staying with his niece in Lhasa, John Kamm of the Dui Hua Foundation in San Francisco, told Reuters news agency.

He still had nine years left on his sentence, and was not due to be released until

Staff and wires

BEIJING, China -- Beijing has freed a Tibetan activist which human rights groups say could be China's longest-serving political prisoner.

Tibetan dissident, Tanak Jigme Sangpo, who has been in jail for nearly two decades, was freed on medical grounds Sunday, a spokesperson for U.S.-based rights group Dui Hua Foundation told Reuters news agency on Thursday.

Jigme Sangpo was put in jail for counter-revolutionary propaganda and incitement in 1983. Sentenced to 15 years in prison, the 76-year-old had his

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September 2011.

The activist may be allowed to apply to receive medical treatment abroad, including in the United States, if he could not be treated in Lhasa, Kamm added.



Human rights groups say Beijing is increased in heavy repression of Tibetan activists

"My sense is that the Chinese government would be very happy if he applied for medical parole," Kamm told Reuters. So far he has made no such request.

Both the European Union and the United States maintain open human rights dialogue with China during which they often bring up cases of individuals they believe to be jailed unjustly.

Foreign affairs

In January, California Democratic U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos, a long-time critic of China's human rights record, raised the case of Jigme Sangpo during a trip to Beijing. U.S. Ambassador Clark Randt has also championed the Tibetan's case.

China often coordinates the release of prisoners with major foreign affairs exchanges.

In January, China released Tibetan scholar Ngawang Choephel on medical parole after serving more than a third of an 18-year sentence on charges of espionage.

Some analysts saw the release as a gesture aimed at boosting ties with the United States ahead of President George W. Bush's visit to Beijing in a month's time.

Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao is also due to visit the United States later this month.

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